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Literary Quality of Hemmingway’s “Hills like White Elephants”

In “Hills like White Elephants,” a short story by Ernest Hemmingway, a couple argues over an unnamed but serious problem in a train station bar near the Ebro River in Spain. Although the story consists mostly of dialogue and uses a very undemanding vocabulary, Hemmingway’s story is a literary short story for several reasons. The author’s use of symbolism and compression, the story’s unique style of writing, and its insight into the human condition all contribute to the literary quality of “Hills like White Elephants.”

First, “Hills like White Elephants” is obviously not a commercial work because it possesses very few commercial traits. The story does not have any sense of suspense, action, or adventure: the characters spend the duration of the story simply drinking, gazing at their surroundings, and talking. The couple tries different drinks such as Anis del Toro, and Jig, trying to be cute, points out that the hills resemble white elephants (269). At no point does the story take a surprising or unexpected turn of events meant to throw the reader off or create suspense for the ending. Rather, the story simply progresses steadily, and at the end a solution for their argument is still not officially reached. There is also no hero or heroine in this story – someone the reader can empathize and share adventures with (65). Both the male and female characters posses less-than-ideal personality traits. For example, the man is selfish – he wants Jig, the girl, to get an abortion so he can continue living in the carefree, no responsibility kind of way he is accustomed to. He does not necessarily care about what is best for Jig or how she feels; he just wants the argument to go his way. On the other hand, Jig seems to be dependent on the man and incapable of being firm in her decision. Both characters are irresponsible and immature, apparent by the selfish way they argue about the issue. In one line, the girl childishly tells the man to “please please please please please please please stop talking” (272). In addition, a set theme or generalization about life is not present in “Hills like White Elephants.” The story deals with the sensitive subject of abortion, but Hemmingway does not provide a lesson or moral that identifies with either pro-life or pro-choice ideals. Finally, there is no happy ending in the story. By the end, the man and Jig do not openly talk about a final decision. Instead, the man goes to carry their luggage to the train tracks, then comes back to meet Jig, who tells him that she feels perfectly fine after their argument (272). The reader is led to believe that a decisive conclusion has not been reached, and must decide for herself what the couple will decide to do. This indecision is best highlighted through the symbolism of the crossroads of the two train tracks.

“Hills like White Elephants” implements a range of symbolism to better compress Hemmingway’s most important pieces of the story. Two train tracks divide the landscape. On one side of the station appears the valley of the Ebro, which was “long and white. On this side there was no shade and no trees” (268). This barren description represents the abortion, with nothing growing or developing. On the other side of the station, the girl describes the landscape as “fields of grain and trees along the banks of the Ebro. Beyond the river were mountains” (271). This prospering contrast to the previous description symbolizes the decision to keep the baby, with its images of natural life and growth. Even more subtle is the symbolism behind line fifty-two, in which the girl pulls two strings out of the beaded curtain in the bar. The two strings represent the couple’s disappointment. One strand is the girl’s unhappiness with the man’s disagreement with her wishes, and the other is the man’s frustration with the girl’s unhappiness and the possible end of his easy, carefree lifestyle. Lastly, the train station itself symbolizes the crossroads in their relationship. Their relationship will be determined by the decision made about the abortion. The couple is unhappy with the way things are currently, and the man feels like an abortion will take the relationship back to earlier, happier times. The girl believes that by keeping the baby, they will progress to the logical next step in their relationship. Either way, their current state of limbo must be tipped in either direction, and the train station represents the verge of this altering decision.

The story’s extensive symbolism is ideal because it compresses the story. Compression is an important aspect of the short story because it allows the author to include all the details and significance of the story while still keeping it concise (274). Symbolism allows this to happen by incorporating hidden but imperative meanings into the story, sometimes leaving the reader to discover the real meaning behind the symbols, or even allowing the reader to form their own educated opinions as to what a person, object, or event really represents. Ernest Hemmingway’s stories are often said to resemble an iceberg. Just as icebergs appear only a little above the water’s surface and the bulk is underwater, Hemmingway writes a seemingly simple story, with much more to interpret beneath the surface. “Hills like White Elephants” is kept to a length of a little over four pages, using simple dialogue and vocabulary, while still conveying enough insight and truth through symbolism and interpretation to make this story a true literary work.

“Hills like White Elephants” is also considered a literary work because of Hemmingway’s unique style of writing. This particular story is very short and composed mostly of dialogue, with a bit of information describing the scenery thrown in. There is very little content in terms of narration, the author deciding instead to let the reader interpret moments of sarcasm, unhappiness, and insincerity. Also, whereas most significant literary writers use somewhat more complex and advanced language, Hemmingway chooses to use words and sentences nearly any person with an elementary school education can understand. This use of beginner language, dialogue, and brevity are what make Hemmingway’s writing style different from that of other literary writers, and “Hills like White Elephants” unique, allowing it to convey more realistic truths.

Most importantly, “Hills like White Elephants” was written, not for entertainment, but to use as insight into the human condition. A literary work “helps us to understand our world, our neighbors, and ourselves” (63). Hemmingway’s story provides us not with merely entertaining circumstances with admirable characters, but with awareness of real life. “Hills like White Elephants” deals with issues such as the unhappiness of being stuck in a frozen relationship, the selfishness of people, and the struggle to make difficult decisions. Not one of these examples is the ideal situation, but they all reflect the complexity of reality.

In conclusion, “Hills like White Elephants” maintains flawed characters and plenty of dialogue to steer clear of a clichéd ending. Hemmingway’s use of symbolism and simple vocabulary allow his story to encompass compression, and also reveal a truthful and insightful look into the human condition. Only in this way can “Hills like White Elephants” be considered a genuine literary story.

Works Cited

R., Thomas, and Greg Johnson Arp. Perrine’s Literature: Structure, Sound, and Sense. Ninth edition. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Wadsworth, 2006.